What is claimed is:

1.   A method for collecting traffic data in a computer network, the method comprising:

(a)   determining a protocol with which to communicate with a network element of a plurality of network elements in a computer network, each of the plurality of network elements operating with a different protocol; and

(b)   collecting traffic data from the network element using the protocol determined in (a).

2.   The method of Claim 1 further comprising determining what traffic data should be collected from the network element.

3.   The method of Claim 1 further comprising configuring the network element to collect the traffic data.

4.   The method of Claim 1 further comprising analyzing the collected traffic data.

5.   The method of Claim 4 further comprising transmitting a result of the analysis to a storage device.

6.   The invention of Claim 1, wherein at least some of the network elements are same type devices from different vendors.

7.   The invention of Claim 1, wherein at least some of the network elements are different type devices from different vendors.

8.   The invention of Claim 1, wherein at least some of the network elements are different type devices from same vendors.

9.   A system for collecting traffic data in a computer network, the system comprising:

    a plurality of network elements in a computer network, each of the plurality of network elements operating with a different protocol; and

    a server coupled with the plurality of network elements, the server operative to determine a protocol with which to communicate with a network element of the plurality of network elements and further operative to collect traffic data from the network element using the determined protocol.

10.   The invention of Claim 9, wherein the server operates on network topology information of the computer network.

11.   The invention of Claim 9, wherein the server operates on a classification schema describing traffic data to be collected from the plurality of network elements.

12.   The invention of Claim 11, wherein the classification schema comprises at least one of a rule for classifying traffic, a specification of types of traffic data to collect, a specification of a type of processing to be performed on collected traffic data, a mechanism by which traffic data is to be transmitted, and a location to which traffic data is to be transmitted.

13.   The invention of Claim 9, wherein the server further comprises a plurality of protocol-specific modules, each of the protocol-specific modules being operative to translate a request for traffic data into a form in accordance with a protocol of a selected network element.

14.   The invention of Claim 13, wherein each of the protocol-specific modules is further operative to configure a selected network element to collect traffic data.

15.   The invention of Claim 9, wherein the server is further operative to analyze collected traffic data.

16.   The invention of Claim 15, wherein the server is further operative to transmit a result of the analysis to a storage device remote from the server.

17.   The invention of Claim 9, wherein the plurality of network elements is located in a point of presence in the computer network, and wherein the server is located in the point of presence.

18.   The invention of Claim 9, wherein the plurality of network elements is located in a point of presence in the computer network, and wherein the server is located outside of the point of presence.

19.   The invention of Claim 9, wherein at least some of the network elements are same type devices from different vendors.

20.   The invention of Claim 9, wherein at least some of the network elements are different type devices from different vendors.

21.   The invention of Claim 9, wherein at least some of the network elements are different type devices from same vendors.

22.   A system for collecting traffic data in a computer network, the system comprising:

means for determining a protocol with which to communicate with a network element of a plurality of network elements in a computer network, each of the plurality of network elements operating with a different protocol; and

5

means for collecting traffic data from the network element using the determined protocol.

10